DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 063 CG 015 798

AUTHOR Field, Dorothy
TITLE Retrospective Reports of Important Personal Events by Aging Persons.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (61st, Los Angeles, CA, April 9-12, 1981). For related documents, see CG 015 799-801.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; *Age Differences; Aging (Individuals); Cognitive Processes; *Family Relationship; Individual Differences; Longitudinal Studies; *Memory; *Older Adults; Personality Traits; *Recall (Psychology); Reliability

ABSTRACT

Only a longitudinal study, in which retrospective reports can be verified against data collected earlier, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain types of individuals are more likely to be accurate reporters. A representative group of adults who became parents 50 years ago are now part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging. Subjects were first interviewed at mean age 29 and again at 47 and 69. Factual questions about such topics as birthplace, education, and occupation, and attitudinal variables such as bonds and relationships with spouse, children, and own parents, were analyzed for consistency over time. Replies given by subjects at each follow-up interview were compared with previously reported information. No sex differences were found for any comparison. No differences were found in background variables; neither education nor occupation predicted consistency in reports. Intelligence did not distinguish persons judged to be high or low in accuracy. No relationship was found between personality measures and accuracy of retrospections. Although subjects showed considerable consistency in their retrospective reports over 40 years of adulthood, factors which could account for individual differences over time or topics were not identified. The findings indicate the need for further investigation using other analytical methods such as case study. (Author/NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED214063

RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS OF IMPORTANT PERSONAL EVENTS BY AGING PERSONS

Dorothy Field

Andrus Gerontology Center
University of Southern California

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dorothy Field

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, April 9-12, 1981.

CG 015798

Retrospective Reports of Important Personal Events by Aging Persons

Dorothy Field

Andrus Gerontology Center
University of Southern California

A rare opportunity to examine the accuracy of aging persons' recollections of events that took place earlier in their lives is reported in this paper. Theories of personality development have relied heavily on retrospective reports for evidence of the influence of earlier events on later personality characteristics. From the time of Freud, retrospective reports have provided much of the substance in studies concerned with the role of early experience and parental functioning in personality development. Similarly, theorists of aging have necessarily placed considerable faith in data collected from old people through recollections and reminiscence. Yet we know very little about how much can be observed by the recollector/informant, or how much can be retained, or how it will be reported.

Only a longitudinal study, in which the retrospective reports can be verified against data collected at earlier times, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain sorts of persons are more likely to be accurate reporters.

Paper presented at the meetings of the Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles, April, 1981.

There have been few studies of retrospective reports from persons of any age (for a review, see Field, 1979). Most of these have examined mothers' reports of events in the early lives of their children (Douglas & Blomfield, 1956; Pyles, Stolz, & Macfarlane, 1935; Yarrow, Campbell & Burton, 1970) or the reports of young adults who were subjects of longitudinal studies (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Livson & McNeill, 1962; Weishaus, 1980). The only studies that have been able to investigate the recall of older persons have examined memory for public events (Squire, 1974), public faces (Warrington & Sanders, 1971), objects in common use (Poon & Fozard, 1978), or events of limited personal significance (Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979; Gekoski & Kerrigan, 1980). In spite of the obvious importance of the question, I have found no other studies that have investigated the accuracy of reports by elderly people of personal events occuring in their own lives.

All the earlier studies have found considerably inaccuracy in memory over time. "Factual" information is recollected with more consistency than "attitudinal" information. Many studies found a directional shift as well, for information was recalled as "better" than it in fact had been: the baby walked and talked earlier, the mother nursed him longer, the child was more outgoing in nursery school, the family had been less often visited by police than could be credited statistically, the men were taller, or the financial situation had not been as difficult as it appeared earlier.

In view of the burgeoning of interest in aging and the fact that most research will of necessity be cross-sectional, it is crucial to determine the interpretability of retrospective reports from cross-sectional samples. Are the anamnestic materials regarding earlier adulthood collected from old persons subject to the same systematic distortions found

in reports of childhood. Are some old people more veridical in their reports, and, if so, can we determine any characteristics that distinguish these people?

Method

Subjects

My subjects are a representative sample of a group of young adults who became parents of babies in Berkeley, California, 50 years ago (Macfarlane, 1938). These babies became the subject of the famous Guidance Study at the Institute of Human Development, and their contribution to our understanding of child development is incalculable, but immense (Jones et al, 1971). The parents, originally studied only for their influence on their children, have recently come to be seen as subjects of great interest in their own right (Field, 1981; Kuypers, 1974; Maas & Kuypers, 1977; Mussen et al, 1980), and are now recognized as part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging.

These adults were interviewed intensively when their children became part of the Guidance Study, and they themselves were young adults (YA), in 1928-1929; again when they were middle aged (MA) and their children were 17 years old, in 1946-1947; and when their children were 40, and they were young-old (YO), in 1968-1969.

My report concerns all parents for whom we have complete data at all three time periods. These survivors were on average age 69 at the time of the last follow-up, with a range of 58 to 80. Although they are a favored group in some ways, they still are broadly representative of surviving persons of their age: every educational level is represented, from less than eight years of education to graduate degrees; as is every occupational level, from unskilled laborer to high professionals. All of the group still live in California, and 80% are within a one-hour drive of

the city where their children were born more than 50 years ago -- a stable population. Their average IQ at age 69 was 119, normally distributed around this high mean.

Analysis

Twenty-four factual questions, such as birthplace, education, and occupation of the subject, the spouse, and the subject's parents, and 23 attitudinal, affect-laden variables, such as bond and relationship with spouse, children, and own parents, were investigated for consistency over time. These variables are listed in Table 1.

It must be emphasized that we are not considering actual changes over time -- as, for example, in the relationship between parent and child -- but rather comparing the parent's first and second report of the same relationship at an earlier time.

The replies given by each subject at each of the follow-up interviews were compared with information gathered earlier. A measure of association, a correlation coefficient, was calculated for each subject for all attitudinal variables for each time comparison separately. Most of the factual responses did not lend themselves to correlational analysis, so percent agreement scores were computed for these variables, indicating consistency over time. Each subject, then, was scored for consistency of report over all three time comparisons: the retrospective reports made in MA about events occuring in YA, those made in YO about events of MA and also reports in YO of events of YA. In addition, we were able to compare reports of each subject's childhood made in YA, MA, and YO.

As is common with longitudinal studies, some of the subjects did not furnish some of the information some of the time. In some cases not enough comparisons were available at a particular time to compile a score, so not all subjects have the complete scores described above. Once the scores were obtained, subjects were classified as high or low in accuracy

at each time comparison for all kinds of questions. High and low groups were compared on demographic, life style, and personality variables.

Results

Factual vs. Attitudinal Questions

An earlier study (Field, 1981) found that, in common with other studies of retrospective reports, factual questions were recalled with greater consistency than were attitudinal questions. In the study reported here, the factual variables that were suitable for correlational analysis yielded quite startling consistency over time: medians of .998, .998, and .992 were found for the three time comparisons. Means were lower (.894, .789, and .926) because of the few highly inaccurate subjects. On average, only 11% of the subjects scored below the mean of the group: the distributions were extremely skewed. The lowest scores were .34, -.27, and -.06.

Change Over Time

The accuracy of the recollections did not diminish as these people grew older. Whether the reporter was middle aged or in young-old age, or whether the recall was over 17, 23, or 40 years, the quality of recollections was maintained. Average correlations for the three comparisons were .558, .554, and .643.

Childhood vs. Adulthood

Family of origin questions were recalled with greater agreement than were questions related to events that had occurred in the subject's adulthood. Mean agreements for family of origin questions were 65% and r = .57, while current family questions yielded 60% and r = .45. Although this difference fell short of significance, it was consistent across all comparisons. It is important to note that the family of origin questions were retrospective at the commencement of the study, so consistency of report is what is being judged here, while reports of events occuring in adulthood were compared to

information and ratings made at the time of the events and recorded by IHD staff.

Demographic Variables

No differences were found between men and women for any of the comparisons. No differences were found in background variables, such as education or occupation of the subject's parents or whether the subject was brought up on a farm or in the city. Neither education nor occupation predicted consistency in reports at any time period. However, in old age, financial status was associated with accuracy: old people who were high-accurate were significantly higher in financial rating in YO, $t(36) = 3.14$, $p < .003$, in agreement with spouse about expenditures in YO, $t(39) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, and in rating of financial situation in MA, $t(35) = 3.00$, $p < .005$.

Intelligence

Although the WAIS test taken at average age 69 was modestly correlated with consistency of reports, $r = .26$, $p < .05$, intelligence did not serve to distinguish people judged to be high or low in accuracy.

Level of Activity

There is a suggestion from these data that the general level of activity has some effect on the quality of retrospections. Those people who were more involved in leisure activities and recreation in MA were the more accurate reporters at that time, $t(17) = 3.15$, $p < .005$, $t(16) = 2.46$, $p < .03$. In YO this had changed: at this later age the more accurate reporters engaged less often in recreational activities, $t(31) = 2.14$, $p < .04$, did less visiting, $t(38) = 2.18$, $p < .04$, and were less often hosts, $t(38) = 2.26$, $p < .03$. They were, however, more involved as parents, $t(39) = 2.54$, $p < .02$.

Personality Characteristics

The most striking findings of the study were quite unexpected. No relationship could be found between personality measures and accuracy of retrospections. Many personality ratings had been made of these people during

the course of their association with IHD: simple but reliable ratings of, for instance, energy, talkativeness, poise, cheerfulness, self-esteem, mental alertness, etc (made in YA and YO); ratings of family members, such as irritability, social adjustment, placidity, worrisomeness, demonstrativeness, consistency, stability, emotional tone of family, etc (made at YA and MA); and Q sorts (Block, 1961) (made at YO). The personality types and life style clusters identified by Maas & Kuypers (1977) also were available.

Although a large number of statistical tests were run, the number of significant results obtained was somewhat less than chance would dictate. There is as yet nothing to indicate that personality is a factor in the veridicality of middle aged and old people when reporting on personal events in their own past lives.

Comparison of High and Low Accuracy People

Finally, it is not really possible to classify people as being highly accurate or inaccurate. There was no person who was above the median of the group in accuracy for all comparisons. Nor was there any person who was below the median for all comparisons. Accuracy does not seem to be a predictable trait.

There were also 15 people who gave so few responses that they could not be included in the comparisons (although they had been interviewed at all three times). Yet, when they were compared with two subgroups who gave many answers, one group with high accuracy and the other with low, still no significant personality differences emerged.

Discussion

These results are indeed puzzling. Given the importance of the problem, it will be pursued with other methods of analysis. A case study method presently appears most promising. We know that as a group these intelligent and healthy people showed considerable consistency in their

retrospective reports over 40 years of adulthood. We do not yet know how to account for individual differences over time or topics.

In this, the study is not alone. Honzik (Pyles et al, 1935) investigated reports given by the same women about their babies when the babies were less than two years old. She found that the mothers were not consistently accurate or inaccurate in all responses, even over this short period.

Commenting on a recent conference on the use of retrospective materials in social surveys (Moss & Goldstein, 1979), Moss observed that the conference participants reported the difficulties but offered few practical suggestions for better research designs. It seems clear that "memory is affected differentially according to the importance individuals attached to the events remembered" (p. 162), but the conference said little about how we could predict which subjects of inquiry or which respondents could be counted on to produce an accurate accounting of past events.

It is but cold comfort to be associated with such august researchers in our quest. It is hoped that further analysis will shed more light on this question.

References

Baddeley, Ad. D., Lewis, V., and Nimmo-Smith, I. When did you last . . . ? In M. M. Gruneberg, P. E. Morris, and R. N. Sykes (Eds.) Practical aspects of memory. London: Academic Press, 1979.

Block, J. The Q-sort method in personality assessment and psychiatric research. Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1961.

Cherry, N., and Rodgers, B. Using a longitudinal study to assess the quality of retrospective data. In L. Moss and H. Goldstein (Eds.) The recall method in social surveys. London: University of London Institute of Education, 1979.

Douglas, J. W. B., and Blomfield, J. M. The reliability of longitudinal surveys. The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, 1956, 34, 227-252.

Field, D. Retrospective reports by healthy, intelligent elderly people of personal events of their adult lives. Paper presented at the meetings of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Lund, June, 1979.

Field, D. Recollections of childhood: Changing perspectives. Paper presented at the meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, November, 1980.

Field, D. Retrospective reports by healthy, intelligent elderly people of personal events of their adult lives. International Journal of Behavioural Development, 1981, 4, in press.

Gekoski, W. L. & Kerrigan, K. M. The reliability of retrospective reports in older males. Paper presented at the meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, November, 1980.

Jones, M. C., Bayley, N., Macfarlane, J. W., and Honzik, M. P. (Eds.) The course of human development. Waltham: Xerox, 1971.

Livson, N., and McNeill, D., The accuracy of recalled age of menarche. Human Biology, 1962, 34, 218-221.

Maas, H. S., and Kuypers, J. A. From thirty to seventy. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.

Macfarlane, J. W. Studies in child guidance: Methodology of data collection and organization. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 3 (6, Serial No. 19).

Moss, L, and Goldstein, H. (Eds.) The recall method in social surveys. University of London Press, 1979.

Mussen, P., Eichorn, D. H., Honzik, M. P., Bieber, S. L., and Meredith, W. M. Continuity and change in women's characteristics over four decades. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 1980, 3, 333-347.

Poon, L. W., and Fozard, J. L. Speed of retrieval from long-term memory in relation to age, familiarity, and datedness of information. Journal of Gerontology, 1978, 33, 711-717.

Pyles, M. K. (now Honzik, M. P.), Stolz, H. R., and Macfarlane, J. W. The accuracy of mothers' reports on birth and developmental data. Child Development, 1935, 6, 165-176.

Squire, L. R. Remote memory as affected by aging. Neuropsychologia, 1974, 12, 429-435.

Warrington, E. K., and Sanders, H. I. The fate of old memories. Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 1971, 23, 432-442.

Weishaus, S. Determinants of affect of middle aged women toward their aging mothers. Paper presented at the meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, San Diego, November, 1980.

Yarrow, M. R., Campbell, J. D., and Burton, R. V. Recollections of childhood: A study of the retrospective method. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 1970, 35 (6, Serial No. 112).

Table 1

List of Variables

Indicating when Information on Each was Gathered

FACTUAL	YA	MA	YO	ATTITUDINAL	YA	MA	YO
				Family of Origin			
birthplace	*	*	*	bond with Mother	*	*	*
position in family	*	*	*	relationship with Mother	*	*	*
church raised	*	*	*	change relationship		*	*
Father birthplace	*	*	*	bond with Father	*	*	*
Mother birthplace	*	*	*	relationship with Father	*	*	*
Father education	*	*	*	change relationship		*	*
Mother education	*	*	*	Father's stamina	*	*	*
Father occupation	*	*	*	Mother's stamina	*	*	*
Mother occupation	*	*	*	marital adjustment parents	*	*	*
Parents separate	*	*	*	intellectual home	*	*	*
Father death		*	*	happy childhood	*	*	*
Mother death		*	*				
				Current Family			
age at marriage	*	*	*	marital adjustment at YA	*	*	
spouse age marriage	*	*	*	bond with child at YA	*	*	
spouse birthplace	*	*	*	relationship with child, YA	*	*	
number children	*	*	*	bond with child at MA		*	*
number boys	*	*	*	relationship with child, MA		*	*
number girls	*	*	*	raise child similarly		*	*
education	*	*	*	want college?		*	*
spouse education	*	*	*	finance at YA	*	*	*
occupation at YA	*	*	*	finance at MA		*	*
occupation at MA		*	*	income worker involvement		*	*
spouse occup. YA	*	*	*	social adjustment YA	*	*	
spouse occup. MA		*	*	social adjustment MA		*	*